

**Contemporary Native Religious Identity:
The Indian Ecumenical Conference**

**A dissertation by
James A. Treat**

**presented to
The Faculty of the
Graduate Theological Union
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Berkeley, California**

December, 1992

Committee signatures

George D. Amos

Timothy J. Ryan

Harold Myer

Contemporary Native Religious Identity: The Indian Ecumenical Conference

James A. Treat

Religious life in many contemporary native communities in Canada and the United States is characterized by unusual forms of religious diversity, involving a variety of tribal traditions, intertribal groups, and denominational churches. During the 1960s a number of grassroots native religious leaders recognized the need for religious healing and revival in order to address the profound social crises affecting their communities; they called for an Indian Ecumenical Conference, which was organized by Robert Thomas, Ian MacKenzie and Wilfred Pelletier. Several hundred native people attended the Conference in 1970 at Crow Agency, Montana, and John Snow invited the group to meet a year later on the Stoney Reserve near Morley, Alberta. The Conference became an annual event and attracted hundreds of religious leaders and thousands of native people during the 1970s and 80s for week-long summer encampments focussed on affirming and strengthening native religious identity.

The Indian Ecumenical Conference was an important new experience in the religious history of North America, and a multidisciplinary study of this interreligious, intertribal, religious movement facilitates an exploration of the dynamics of

contemporary native religious identity. As a religious movement, the Conference promoted the revival of native religious traditions; religious revival is a product of both continuity and innovation and is rooted in the authenticity of personal religious experience. As an intertribal gathering, the Conference encouraged inclusive attitudes toward religious participation; religious adaptation in a complex and conflictual sociocultural milieu involves a strategic expansion of identities, not a substitution of one comprehensive identity for another. As an interreligious community, the Conference emphasized the shared religious heritage of native people; religious diversity should be viewed in terms of complementarity, and religious solidarity should be expressed through interreligious dialogue, cooperation and advocacy. Contemporary native religious identity is less a function of cultural phenomena described through social scientific methodologies, and more a product of shared interests and perceptions, networks of relationship, the ability to empathize, and an unusual combination of mutual respect and self-deprecating humor.

George C. L. Cummings, Chair

Preface

I was browsing the used books section at Moe's, where the selection is great and the staff is consistently efficient and rude, when I discovered a perfect hardbound copy of Chief John Snow's These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places. I knew that the out-of-print book was a fascinating account combining cultural history, land claims research, tribal biography, and religious discourse, but I didn't realize on that afternoon in 1988 that the book would eventually play a central role in my academic program. A year later I completed the Master of Arts degree at the Pacific School of Religion and matriculated at the Graduate Theological Union.

I moved into and through the doctoral program at a remarkably comfortable pace, largely because of the efforts of mentors, colleagues and friends who cleared the path. David Steward guided and encouraged me as I persuaded various committees to approve of my idiosyncratic academic visions. Karen Biestman went out of her way and convinced the Dean of the Graduate Division to hire me as a teaching assistant for Native American Studies at the University of California. Paul Schultz and Judy Wellington welcomed me into the Bay Area Native American Ministry and taught me Chippewa humility and Pima patience, and a little Indian humor. My brother John helped me learn to translate

Spanish on a wager; we both won, and later shared a pretentious meal at Chez Panisse.

My graduate work focussed on contemporary religious issues among native people in the United States and Canada, and as I reviewed the scholarly and popular literature on the subject I repeatedly encountered brief mentions of the Indian Ecumenical Conference. I did my first systematic research on the Conference in a graduate seminar on "American Indian Social Movements" led by Russell Thornton during the fall semester of 1990. I learned that the annual gatherings were vital experiences for thousands of native people during the 1970s and 80s; I also found that the Indian Ecumenical Conference is virtually unknown outside of the Indian community.

A year later I needed a dissertation topic and realized that a multidisciplinary study of the Indian Ecumenical Conference would provide an ideal opportunity to discuss some important aspects of contemporary native religious identity. Giles Poitras, inter-library loan wizard, enabled my research by procuring defunct Indian newspapers and obscure Canadian denominational publications. After exhausting bibliographic resources, I travelled to the Stoney Reserve in the summer of 1992 for the seventeenth Indian Ecumenical Conference. Chief John Snow welcomed me and granted me permission to study at the Nakoda Institute, where Farley Wuth opened the archives and treated me like an honored guest.

My dissertation committee worked with me to make the project innovative, relevant and manageable. George Cummings, who

had introduced me to the "theory" and "praxis" of theological studies five years earlier, chaired the committee. Tim Lull read my drafts closely and offered constructive criticism and helpful advice. Gerald Vizenor suggested important improvements in my writing style, asked challenging questions about my methodology, and introduced me to the value of narrative theory.

Several other people advanced my progress in significant ways. C. S. Song, who chaired my thesis committee at the Pacific School of Religion, allowed me to serve as his teaching assistant for three semesters as he showed skeptical, stubborn seminarians how to do theology. Eldon Ernst enthusiastically served as my faculty sponsor for two consecutive research projects funded by the Newhall Fellowship program. Jean Molesky taught me how to teach, and she and her family made me feel part Polish, part Mayan.

To these and other friends and family in Berkeley and Oakland, Illinois and South Dakota, Canada and the United States and elsewhere: thank you.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	i
Preface	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. Contemporary Native Religions	6
Western Scholars and Native Religions	
Religious Identity	
Contemporary Native Religious Identity	
Chapter 2. The Indian Ecumenical Conference	44
The Anglican Church of Canada	
The Indian Ecumenical Conference at Crow Fair	
The Stoney Tribe	
The Indian Ecumenical Conference at Stoney Park	
Theoretical Perspectives on the Indian Ecumenical Conference	
Chapter 3. The Indian Ecumenical Conference as a Religious Movement	120
Native Religious Movements	

Revitalization Movement Theory	
Social Movement Theory	
The Indian Ecumenical Conference	
Chapter 4. The Indian Ecumenical Conference as an Intertribal Gathering	160
Theories of Pan-Indianism	
Religious Pan-Indianism	
The Indian Ecumenical Conference	
Chapter 5. The Indian Ecumenical Conference as an Interreligious Community	189
Interreligious Interaction	
Theories of Interreligious Dialogue	
The Indian Ecumenical Conference	
Conclusions. Contemporary Native Religious Identity	224
Appendices	233
1. Conference Statistics	
2. Conference Organizers and Participants	
Notes	238
Bibliography	284